



Rocket Science by theowlandtheunicorn

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Summary: Dustin needs answers to some important questions, and where better to get them from than his buddy Steve?... who's generally more comfortable swinging a nail-studded bat at monsters. Featuring Dustin being Dustin, and Steve being a mom, a dad, a big brother and (most of all) a friend.

Rocket Science

Steve reached for the last beer out of reflex, then hesitated. After several seconds, he just took the orange juice.

He almost closed the fridge, but changing his mind at the last moment, he took out a couple of chocolate puddings too.

A year ago, the most common item in the Harringtons' fridge had been beer. Lately, however, Steve found himself stocking up on juice more than anything else.

Just in case anyone wanted juice.

Steve shut the door of the fridge and set the carton and the puddings on the counter, then took out a bag of trail mix from the wall cabinet. He'd have to buy some beer tomorrow, he thought half-heartedly, just in case his dad returned earlier from his trip.

Not that there was much room anymore. All those juice cartons.

Steve opened another cabinet and his hand grasped for some glasses and a bowl, but caught only the stale, empty air within. He closed his eyes. He gazed at the gloomy pile of dirty dishes in the sink, looming like Mt. Everest over the juice and the trail mix.

Sighing, Steve rolled up his sleeves and turned on the faucet.

"Are you actually squeezing the oranges yourself in there?" Dustin yelled from the living room after a while. "What's taking so long?"

"In a minute, keep your pants on," Steve shouted.

Steve never thought he'd be spending so much time with Dustin Henderson – after the whole nightmare with Dart, he had assumed things would simply go back to the way they were, but Dustin had called and asked if he wanted to hang out, and Steve had no idea why because as far as he knew the kid had no other murderous pets at the time. Still, he told him to come over, and later that day, after he drove him home, he realized a staggering truth:

Dustin was actually pretty cool.

Not that Steve would ever admit it.

Plus, there was that entire business of almost dying right next to each other, and according to Steve's grandfather, you never forgot the people you almost died with.

So, by the night of the Snow Ball, Steve had found himself insanely invested in Dustin's life and well-being, wanting to do everything to ensure the little shithead had a happy time –

"I can *literally feel* my blood sugar dropping, Steve –"

"Yeah, it's coming," Steve snapped, "stop being such a drama queen."

Not that Steve had any idea how the Snow Ball actually went. He'd been looking forward to hearing about it to a stupid degree, but when he asked, Dustin just said it had been awesome, grinned, and that was it.

Naturally, the lack of a characteristic reaction made Steve wonder. Usually, when Dustin liked something, it was hard to get him to shut up – if a week could go by that Steve didn't have to hear about Dungeons and Dragons or Lord of the Rings, it would have been totally fine – but on the topic of the Snow Ball he had been suspiciously quiet.

Not that Steve was too worried. Any evening nobody got mauled by a monster or whisked off to another dimension was a successful evening as far as he was concerned; the Ball had probably been fine, just not as great as Dustin had expected, as such things usually go. So, even though he was slightly disappointed, he didn't push for a more elaborate answer.

"You are taking forever," Dustin said wearily, appearing at the door.

"Yeah, well, how about some help?" Steve said, but Dustin was already reaching for the detergent.

"Hasn't anyone told you it's bad manners to make a guest do the dishes?" he said, grinning.

"Guest my ass. You're in this house more than my parents. Wash those glasses."

"Yes, my lord."

After a few seconds, Dustin wiped the glasses and placed them on the counter. Whistling to himself, Steve started pouring the orange juice.

"Steve, how do you kiss girls?"

"*What? – oh shit –*"

"... You've spilled some."

"Yeah, thanks," Steve muttered, grabbing a dish towel and wiping the orange mess. When he was finished, he found Dustin observing him with a blank, innocently serious expression on his face.

"You're asking me to tell you how to *kiss girls*."

Dustin nodded.

"Well, what kind of a question is that? It's not like there's some great science about it. You just... press your lips against hers," Steve said unsurely.

Dustin scoffed. "Mike and Lucas could have told me that. I'm asking you because you're the expert. I need the specifics."

Steve gave a laugh. "No. No way," he said, shaking his head. "No way am I having this conversation." He took the glasses and led the way into the living room. Dustin followed him.

"Yes way! I have questions, you have the answers. Give them."

"Not happening," he said.

Dustin gaped indignantly.

"You want your mentee to be the only one out of the loop? This will reflect very poorly on you, Steve," he warned.

"Yeah, I'll survive. You can find out just like everyone else does."

A gasp.

"I come to you with humbleness and respect, seeking valuable life knowledge and information, and you don't even wanna help me? Are you serious?"

"Yep," Steve said, feeling faintly guilty. He set the glasses on the living room table, then sat down on the couch. He knew Dustin was going through his usual variety of manipulation techniques, but Steve wasn't going to cave in this time. He *wasn't*.

"Come on! I need to be prepared! It could happen any day now, I don't wanna be totally clueless, or-or get it wrong –"

"It's kissing, shithead, not a math problem. You can't get it wrong."

"Only if you help me." Dustin sat down next to him with a soft smile and radiant eyes, and blinked his best puppy impression.

Steve sighed in frustration. *Damn it.*

"If you tell *anyone* –"

"Yeah, I'm gonna tell everyone, 'cause it makes me sound so cool," Dustin said sarcastically.

"Alright, let's get this over with. What do you wanna know?"

Dustin shifted in his seat, bouncing with excitement.

"Okay, first of all. How can I always be prepared? Like... mints?"

"Sure, if you want."

"Can I also ask her to eat a mint?"

"What? No. No, that's not cool. And don't let her see you took one either. What was literally the first thing I taught you?"

"Act like you don't care, even if you do?"

"Exactly. Next question."

"What do I do with my hands?"

Steve thought about what he did with his hands, then tried to adjust it to the middle school level.

"You can place them lightly on her waist, or her back... or maybe hold her hand, or touch her face."

Dustin positioned his hands around some air. "Like this?"

"Well... yeah, just... relax your fingers a bit. That'd just hurt her."

"Okay."

"Next."

"What's French kissing?"

Steve put his face in his hands. For a moment, he was tempted to dismiss the question with a joke or a lie, but then he thought better of it. Dustin had come to him because he *trusted* him. Taking advantage of that had to have been a criminal offence; besides, the kids were enough of a laughing stock as it was. He sighed.

"I'll tell you, alright, but I don't want you doing that the first time." Steve took a deep breath, mustering the patience. "It's kissing, but you use your tongue."

"Oh man, that's gross," Dustin said, laughing.

"If it's still gross, you shouldn't be doing it yet," Steve snapped.

Dustin shrugged. "Mike and Lucas are doing it."

"Is Will?" he asked pointedly.

"Will has been trapped in the Upside Down and possessed by the Mind Flayer, Steve. He hasn't exactly had time to go around kissing girls."

"... And you've been rescuing him from all that."

"... So have Mike and Lucas."

"Alright, so what? You don't have to do everything your dipshit friends do. If Mike and Lucas jum—"

Steve froze. To think he almost... But he stopped himself in time. Just barely.

"What were you going to say?"

"Nothing," Steve said quickly. He was his *own dad*. The thought made him shudder. He shook his head in disgust.

Then another thought occurred. "Wait, are they giving you shit for not kissing anyone yet?" he asked, narrowing his eyes. "Cause if they are —"

"No, no one's giving me shit," Dustin reassured. "Well, I'm giving me shit."

"Then stop it, okay? Don't be such a shithead. You don't have to do something just because everyone else is doing it, even if it's your friends who are doing it. Trust me, I know. And it's too soon anyway, you're like ten years old —"

"I'm *thirteen*," Dustin said indignantly. "And a *half*."

"My point exactly," Steve said.

"So how old were you when you had your first kiss?"

"Eleven."

Dustin started to splutter, but before he could make a coherent protest, Steve cut him off.

"No no no no no, listen, that's exactly what I'm saying, and I'm eighteen now. With age and experience, you acquire wisdom —"

Dustin snorted.

"— *wisdom* — to know you don't have to do it if you're not ready. You think I wanted to do it at eleven? Tommy and everyone else were doing it, so I thought I had to. It was at a party, and it was this girl I

didn't even like. Tommy arranged the whole thing, shit, it was so lame." He remembered the sweaty palms and the painfully dry mouth, along with the face of Penny Hamilton standing way too close, looking so much surer of herself than he felt. It was funny now; with countless others, the initial tangle of nerves in his stomach had become a pleasant cocoon of habit before finally turning into butterflies of his first love last year.

"At the time I was just glad she was pretty and that I finally got to kiss someone, but afterwards I just thought... maybe it wasn't necessarily how it was supposed to go. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't bad, I just... don't know why I was in such a rush to do it," he finished. He looked at Dustin. "What I'm trying to say is, there's plenty of time for all that later. What there isn't plenty of time for is being a dipshit kid. So enjoy it while it lasts."

Dustin looked down, then nodded.

Steve smiled. A warm feeling spread through his chest. His words actually seemed to *help*!

"Trust me, you'll be fine," he continued, inspired. "You just gotta give yourself time. Don't feel like you have to do it right now if you don't want to."

"No, I want to," Dustin said. "I just..."

"Scared, huh?"

He nodded.

"You fought the Demodogs, Henderson."

"Girls can be scarier than Demodogs," Dustin said with a small grin.

Steve tilted his head left and right.

Then he realized it was the perfect opportunity to ask. "Did you dance with any girls at the Snow Ball?"

Dustin looked down and started picking at a thread in his sleeve.

"Not really," he mumbled. "None of them wanted to. Well, Nancy danced with me, but she was the only one."

A breath caught in Steve's throat. He felt that melting sensation that lately always seemed to emerge when thinking about Nancy; remembered her beautiful smile radiating through the school window. It was just like her to do something so sweet just to make Dustin feel better. *Lucky bastard*, he thought fondly.

He tried to smile in response. It might have been a limited success, but hey, he tried. At that, Dustin sat up straight, his eyes wide.

"Son of a bitch, no – don't worry, Steve, we're not like, together or anything, I swear. It was just a dance," he said, hands gesticulating madly. "She was just being nice to me. Shit, you have to believe me, I would *never* be that shitty to you –"

"... Thanks, man. That's good to know," Steve said, trying his best to sound sincere despite the barely contained laughter making his cheeks twitch. Forget about the monsters from another dimension, the day Nancy started dating her baby brother's nerdy friends would be the day the world ended.

Dustin nodded with serious relief. He sagged back into the couch.

"She was just trying to make me feel better," he said. "Man, Nancy's so nice. Why did you two break up again?"

Did this kid have to know everything about *everything* –

"Cause I was an asshole," Steve said, because it was easiest. And then, just to be quite honest, "And, Nancy was a bit of an asshole too. Happy?"

"No," Dustin said angrily. He sat up again, his mouth hanging open. "You're not an asshole, Steve," he insisted, as if Steve had insulted a family member of his, "you're the coolest! And Nancy isn't an asshole either –"

"Alright, alright –"

"– like seriously, what's wrong with you –"

"She's not, I know –"

"Neither are you!"

"Fine!" Steve yelled, throwing his hands up. He stood up and paced in front of the couch. "It's just..." He sighed. He cast a look across the living room, then sat down again. "Look, sometimes, two people who aren't normally assholes, they... act like assholes towards each other. Okay?"

Dustin frowned.

"Why?"

"Why? Man, I don't know why. I don't fucking know." Steve ran a hand through his hair. He didn't remember signing up for this. "Haven't you ever acted like an asshole to one of your friends?"

Dustin shrugged. "Probably. But so have they. Plenty of times. What's the big deal?"

"Yes, but you see, in a relationship, that's usually a problem."

"Why?"

"I don't know, it just... hurts more. Because that's the one person in your life who shouldn't be an asshole," Steve said. He bit his lip. He suddenly felt very vulnerable. He glanced at Dustin uncertainly.

Dustin was staring at him as if he had said something particularly stupid.

"So then why were you and Nancy like that?"

Steve stood up again and took a few steps away from the couch.

"Look, just leave it, alright?" he said impatiently, and instantly felt guilty as Dustin looked down. He took a deep breath. "I just... I don't even know. If I did..." *we might never have broken up. We might have chaperoned the Snow Ball together and had the cheesiest, most wonderful time.* He rubbed his eyes and sighed. "And I already told you you're too young for this shit."

"Yeah, and that's bullshit," Dustin said quietly.

"What?"

Dustin was still looking down. "It's not my age that's the problem here," he mumbled in a mildly offended tone. "I mean, it's fine, it's just, you don't have to lie. You could have just said, Dustin, I don't wanna talk to you 'cause you don't know shit about girls or relationships."

"*What?* That's not even –"

"Hey, it's no big deal," he interrupted, and Steve wasn't sure but were those *actual tears in his eyes* – "I get it. You'd rather talk to your friends 'cause they actually *have* experience, that's fine, but you can at least be hon–"

"Dustin, just shut up, alright?"

He did, still resolutely looking down. Steve sat down at the edge of the table in front of Dustin and leaned forward.

"First of all, it's not you, okay, so you can forget about that," he said softly. "I'm not talking to anyone about it because there's nothing to say. There's no point." He didn't want to mention that he'd had no one to talk to, not anymore... not for a long time. Maybe he never had. "Me and Nancy, we're not together anymore. It's just how it is, and talking about it won't do shit for you, for me, or for anyone."

"Second of all..." Steve began, and made a long enough pause that Dustin raised his eyes. "After everything that's happened, do you actually think I consider anyone a better friend than you? Give me a break."

He had guessed hearing that would mean a lot to the kid (not that it made it any less true). But he wasn't expecting a beaming grin of pure adoration to spread across his face.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Dustin looked down again, his smile impossibly wide, then back at Steve.

"Cool."

Steve smiled back.

"Alright now, enough with the mushy stuff. Want some more juice?"

"Yeah. And bring the chocolate pudding."

Steve took Dustin's empty glass and went back into the kitchen. A snuffle followed him out.

Steve put the glass down, then placed both of his hands on the counter and exhaled through his mouth. He shook his head. He stood like that for several moments.

Then he became aware of the juice carton next to his hand – he'd forgotten to put it back in the fridge, it was probably warm now – and the chocolate pudding. He grabbed the juice and opened it.

"Hey, Steve!" Dustin yelled from somewhere in the vicinity.

"Yeah?"

"As your official best friend..."

Steve groaned. Shit he was going to regret saying that, he *knew* he was going to regret it and he said it anyway –

"... I just wanna say that if you ever feel like talking about all that Nancy stuff, or any other stuff, you can talk to me, alright?"

Steve paused with his hand in the air, the juice carton halted halfway towards the glass. Then, after a few seconds, he chuckled.

"Yeah, alright," he said. And then added, almost to himself, so quietly: "Thanks."

... Maybe he wouldn't regret it after all.

A/N: My first Stranger Things fic (hello, fandom! :D), possibly not the last. Because I love these characters SO MUCH and I just want to talk about their beautiful relationship.

Thank you so much for reading! Do say something in the comments if you feel like it, I appreciate it beyond words :)